



# POSITION PAPER

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## ISSUE: Visitability

### Introduction

**The purpose of this paper is to address the lack of visitable housing in Pennsylvania, particularly the lack of such homes located in safe and integrated communities with access to public transportation, employment and home and community based services.** Both in Pa and nationally, these challenges exist in all geographic areas: urban, suburban and rural. In Pa, there are nearly 2 million people (including children) with disabilities or about 15-20% of the overall population (about 12.44 million as of 2006 US Census estimates) from all walks of life. **The lack of residential visitability must be addressed now –and not merely an option- for both current and future housing.**

### Defining and Explaining Visitability:

**For the purposes of this paper, the definition of Visitability includes:**

1. At least one zero-step entrance on an accessible route leading from a driveway or public sidewalk;
2. All interior doors must provide at least 32 inches (81 cm) of clear open width;
3. A circulation path into and through an visitable entry that must be at least 36 inches;
4. An accessible bathroom located on the first floor.

**Visitability** is a shared challenge and vision by many in the disability and aging communities. This means building designs that remove barriers to full use of wheelchairs, scooters and other mobility devices. Residential visitability means improving homes to make them more “visitable” (and usable) by family members or other visitors who use wheelchairs, scooters, or other devices like walkers. Visitability features make it easier for all people, including those with mobility impairments, to move about their daily routines while enjoying their homes and those of their friends.

These modifications can usually be incorporated into new or renovated homes at minimum cost. **And, finally, Visitability should not be confused with accessibility. A home with visitable features includes accessibility into the home, but not clear access to multi-levels of a home. While advocates for visitability support completely accessible housing, the focus of this paper is to promote the merits of Visitability (Visitability is not part of the ADA but accessibility is, which covers visitability concerns noted here).**

### Obstacles to Visitability:

On the surface, it may appear that visitability should be an easy sell, especially in the disability and housing communities. After all, wouldn't individuals want to be able to stay in their homes for as long as possible and shouldn't homes be built to ensure that a

person stays there so they can remain a part of their community and pay taxes, thereby increasing community stability? Why not save future dollars with upfront investment?

Unfortunately, there are several obstacles. **Perhaps the most basic one is attitudes: 'It's always been done this way', don't know someone who benefits from this concept, or no vision for possible needs related to disability or aging.** These attitudes in part come from a lack of education for housing professionals on visitability. Another similar issue is that visitability is seen as optional, but not a top priority for the housing community. Further, the lack of uniform visitability standards in both products and codes, as well as some construction costs, have made increased use of visitability designs a greater challenge. The absence of industry standards and related codes has resulted in some substandard home modifications, thereby not producing proper visitable houses and potentially decreasing property values.

The cost of visitability designs in retrofits and new construction come up as a road block. Unfortunately, there are limits on public and private grants available for remodeling homes for purposes of visitability. There is further debate over whether visitable designs should be mandated or an option. When it's been an option, few builders have chosen to build new homes but if it's a mandate, builders have threatened not to build. **While we acknowledge that those barriers noted here are relevant, none are insurmountable in reaching the goal of making both current future homes visitable.**

### **Benefits of Visitability:**

**To supporters of building and rehabilitating properties with visitability in mind for the present, the current benefits are obvious and are worth navigating the challenges noted above.** One benefit is empowering a more positive outlook for resident as a result of greater freedom. Making a home visitable empowers people to stay in their homes longer. Having a visitable home also empowers individuals with disabilities to receive Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) from others with visitability challenges. **HCBS saves individuals and the public sector funds on long term care (LTC): in PA, it is estimated that nursing homes cost \$51,000 annually versus \$21,000 or receiving services in the community.**

Visitability empowers continuity in families and communities, something lacking in today's society, as family members often live further apart from each other in the past. Having a visitable home enables people with disabilities to be visited by others with mobility challenges. It is important to note that making a home visitable in the present saves on future costs later, as retrofits are more costly than new construction. Many of us will acquire a disability at some point in life. Instituting visitability in homes makes it easier to move in and out of homes, as less likelihood of property damage due to wider rooms, halls and doorways. Visitability provides for easier evacuation in cases of emergency /natural disasters. Individuals with disabilities have learned this in recent years, particularly those who survived Hurricane Katrina. Finally, for those who seek to make their homes visitable, there is some public sector funding, mainly through local or county government and in some cases foundations or companies. A few areas have local visitability ordinances or tax credits. For more information on visitability ordinances and tax credits, see [www.concretechange.org](http://www.concretechange.org) or [www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/](http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/) .

## **PA SILC Recommendations: Response to obstacles**

**It is true that not all issues come back to public policy. By embracing the IL philosophy for all aspects of life, particularly visitability, everyone can make a positive difference in their communities. Having said that, many issues related to housing and people with disabilities come under the realm of public policy.**

**The goal of this document is provide all housing stakeholders, both those in the private and public sectors, an awareness and importance of creating more visitable housing across the state.** The PA SILC makes the following recommendations:

### ***General:***

- Starting with an positive attitude: begin with “the end in mind” of a visitable home with a positive appearance;
- Increasing education on visitability for housing related professionals: realtors, builders, bankers, architects, landlords, legal professionals, housing agencies, code enforcement officers, property assessors, policy makers / government employees in housing related positions and other community partners;
- Increasing productivity of visitable housing in both the private and public sectors;
- Supporting 100% visitability for all new housing start-ups in both the private and public sectors to have full visitability with those standards stated in this paper;
- Having uniform visitability and building code standards that cover both the private and public sectors that are consistent statewide;
- Contacting your governmental bodies to see if they offer a visitability ordinance and tax credits (municipal, county, school board)

### ***Federal:***

- Facilitating cooperation that includes interdepartmental and inter-governmental MOUs (Memorandums Of Understanding) and cross systems groups, including, but not limited to the following: Housing & Urban Development (HUD), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development, Transportation (DOT), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS), Health & Human Services (HHS), Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), the President’s Cabinet along with bipartisan representation from both bodies in Congress and others to address the housing needs of people with disabilities that include both policy and budgetary recommendations related to increasing visitability;
- Continuing efforts within the Intergovernmental Council on Homelessness related to making visitability a topic of discussion;
- Ensuring that all new and rehabilitated housing funded through the federal government is visitable;
- Supporting the enforcement of all related Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)/ Section 504 compliance, related Fair Housing Acts provisions, particularly in reference to Public Housing Authorities (PHA) laws, regulations and other policies by HUD and other federal agencies. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 mandates that at least 5% of all Federally funded housing be accessible (complies with the Uniform Federal Accessible Standards) and this

provision is not enforced by many housing authorities. (Visitability is also a recommendation, but not a mandate for Hope VI housing projects);

- Supporting adequate annual funding of the Affordable Housing Trust Fund portion of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 with assurances that: 1) all new homes built with these funds are visitable; 2) some AHTF funding is utilized for making existing homes visitable;
- Ensuring passage of the Inclusive Home Design Act (HR 4202 in 2008) in the upcoming Congress (111<sup>th</sup> Congress for 2009-2010). This would mandate visitability in any federally funded housing efforts.

### ***State Government:***

- In convening stakeholder groups to address housing issues related to people with disabilities across departments that includes, but it is not limited to the following departments: Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA), Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED), Department of Public Welfare (DPW), Office of Long Term Living (OLTL), Aging (PDA), Transportation (Penn DOT), Labor & Industry (L&I), members from the Governor's Office and the 4 Legislative Caucuses and others deemed appropriate that include both policy and budgetary recommendations- make sure that visitability is addressed;
- Advocating for passage of a Pa Housing Trust Fund that may include: 1) funds only new housing that is visitable; 2) funding to make existing homes visitable;
- Encouraging state public policy makers that all new and eventually existing housing funded through state government is visitable;
- Advancing changes for state wide building code (BOCA-Building Office Code Administrators) that includes visitability standards;
- Ensuring that the residential facilities that are applying to be considered for Pa's proposed Assisted Living Waiver-both current and new/ future construction- are consistent with standards established in this paper;
- Requiring and training state government employees involved in housing for people with disabilities on visitability standards;
- Encourage DCED and others in state government to follow PHFA's example of supporting 100% Visitability and adaptability in new construction and 25% Visitability in rehabilitation projects of existing buildings. PHFA also offers extra points in its competitive ranking for Low Income Tax Housing Tax Credit program when builders double the percentage of accessible units (10%). **While the goal is ultimately 100% Visitability for both new and rehabilitated housing, PHFA has moved in a direction consistent with this position paper.**

### ***Local / County Governments:***

- Increasing awareness and advocacy of local and county elected officials and their member organizations related to issues of importance to the disability community;
- **Implementing the Visitability Tax Credit (Act 132: SB 1158 of 2006) by all local (municipalities, school districts) and county governments in PA;**
- Training of housing program and code enforcement staff by educating them on the latest standards of and reasons for visitability.